

*Development Tourism: Lessons from Cuba*

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Cuba rejected international tourism after the 1959 revolution but, as the influence of the USSR declined, reluctantly turned to it again as a source of foreign exchange and employment, with the result that some negative impacts of earlier tourism have reportedly returned (pp. 13-19).

This book is an anthropological approach to an *aspect* of this transition, namely, the nature and role of NGO study tours in contributing to ‘development’ in Cuba, in particular, tours operated by OXFAM and Global Exchange, which included visits to schools, women’s and agricultural projects, and health centres. Clearly, these are *not* activities followed by more typical tourists to Cuba, who stay in large beach-side hotels run as joint ventures with the Cuban government.

Following the very personal Introduction, where individual insights are combined with a more academic discussion on anthropological methods, the book is in three parts. Part 1 (chapters 1 and 2) focuses on the emergence of tourism as a strategy for development and recent moral debates over the *nature* of mass and ‘responsible’ tourism. Part 2 (chapters 3 and 4) centres more specifically on the re-emergence of international tourism in Cuba and the NGO tours, while the two chapters in Part 3 further analyse the motivations of these ‘new tourists’ and the impacts of the tours on their perceptions of Cuba.

In Part 1 there is a fairly standard survey of the role of globalisation in development and a useful but somewhat partial advocacy of ‘the tourism pro-poor paradigm’ (44) and the related ‘the human rights paradigm,’ typified by new social movements, of which the NGOs discussed at

length in the book are examples. Though discussing Butcher's criticisms of the new 'moral tourists' at length, Spencer in effect asserts that such a 'new moral tourism paradigm' (p.69) does indeed exist, and that the NGOs on which she concentrates are able (by implication, unlike commercial tour operators) to link ('responsible') tourism and development.

Chapters 3 and 4 deal with development in revolutionary Cuba and the NGO study tours. In the former, key issues affecting the Cuban economy since the fall of the USSR, including the return to international tourism as a source of foreign exchange, are outlined, as are the regime's reactions to the new situation, including a series of reforms. Arguably, the author's depiction of Cuba during and after the years of dependence on the Soviet Union is partial. Her apparent enthusiasm for the Revolution's achievements could certainly be queried by others with a less positive view of the Castro regime. In this respect, some reference, at least, could have been made to the more critical literature on post-1959 Cuban development, for example, the long-standing contributions of Irving Horowitz (Horowitz and Suchlicki, 2003).

For Spencer, Cuban socialism has consistently focused on equity, and the NGO study tours on which she concentrates (and once co-ordinated) introduce the successes and failures of the Cuban development model, educate tourists, and simultaneously reduce tourism's negative impacts (p.94). At the same time, to her credit, she recognises the tours do *not* include visits to any of the regime's dissidents, and gloss over less favourable aspects of the revolution, in which regard 'there are some very strong parallels between the early reverential tours to the Soviet Union to see the ideals of socialism in action by those critiquing capitalist development and NGO study tours to Cuba today' (pp. 95-96).

Elements of several days of the NGO study tours, ranging in length from one to three weeks, the exposure of tourists to Cuba development projects, and their responses, are provided in chapter 4. The format here resembles a diary/summary (with pictures), so there are (for instance) ten pages (pp. 100-109) on a visit to two NGOs, with an extended summary of the presentations to the visitors and, in turn, a shorter account of their questions. Other visits, to Oxfam's offices in Cuba, to a community workshop, a primary school, and a hospital, are similarly described, with presenters listing the successes of their particular organisations, despite the dominant economic problems, and tourists asking questions and receiving responses with which they (generally) seem satisfied.

In chapter 5, 'Motivations of New Moral Tourists', the author situates her account in 'the well-established personal transition literature of anthropologists' and reports the (stated) reasons for travel for many of the tourists, commonly including the desire to *learn* - about Cuba, especially before it changes, and about a form of development that differs from that of North America - as well as to meet Cubans and show solidarity with the NGOs and Cuban development efforts. In the process (as described in chapter 6), they participate in new social movements (as represented by the NGOs) and, in some cases (cf. pp. 163-164) deepen their commitment in supporting socialist Cuba. Spencer argues that even though such commitments are more reaffirmations of pre-tour views than conversions (p.166), the ensuing enhanced support for the NGOs and the cause of Cuba socialism is enough to enable us 'to conceive of NGO study tourists as agents of development, even if only to a minor degree' (167). In general, the tourists' pre-tour support for and knowledge of Cuban socialism was reinforced by participating in the tours, confirmed further through discussions with their fellow moral tourists, and again highlighted through the (apparent) spontaneity of the 'real' Cubans they encountered. For Spencer,

(While) NGO tourism is not a new social movement *per se*, it lends itself to particular outcomes associated with the power of new social movements., The level of impact on the tourists themselves through transformation led to agency that in turn enhanced social capital in Cuba (p.191).

In her concluding chapter, Spencer reiterates the view that the niche tourism she has described links tourism positively to NGO-sponsored development, facilitates increased international understanding, and furthers 'rights-based tourism' (p.196). Rejecting 'mass tourism' and 'neoliberal globalisation,' participants in her NGO tours are exemplars of new moral tourism. And Cuba? 'Cuba forms an example of a model that tourists are compelled to study, support and promote' (197).

The book is extremely well written and benefits from Spencer's direct experience in coordinating the tours, And such examples of niche tourism are rarely described. Furthermore, it probably *is* a good time to visit Cuba, which is already moving away from a revolution initiated more than five decades ago, well before most of its present citizens were born.

Nevertheless, I have some issues. As noted elsewhere , I doubt the existence of a separate 'pro-poor tourism paradigm' (Harrison, 2008) and similarly, that of a 'rights-based' tourism paradigm. Rather, I suggest the real issue here is the (non-profit making) involvement of NGOs in tourism - in Cuba or elsewhere - and how far they have the ability to offer a real (and economically sustainable)'alternative' to commercial tourism. Or are they simply catering for a niche market?

In addition, despite her anthropological orientation, Spencer's ethnographic data seem to lack substance. The quotes from the tourists are interesting, but not really enough. I would have

appreciated more focused case studies, of tourists, places visited and the different Cubans they encountered. However, as she herself recognises, the visits were very controlled, even contrived, and such an approach might not have been possible.

Indeed, an ambivalence to the regime seems to run throughout the book. Reference has already been made to parallels of the NGO study tours and those made by Western visitors to the Soviet Union, not only in the visitors' 'reverential' attitude, but also in the level of control exercised by the authorities and the deliberate neglect of issues of human rights (pp. 96-99). Spencer is clearly aware of the regime's controlling instincts and the partiality of the information provided to tour participants, yet the *ideals* of the revolution and the sheer gutsiness of Cubans' refusal to bow to the pointless (and diplomatically self-defeating) United States trade embargo, also demand respect, even if the latter is too regularly used as an explanation for every social problem or government failure. (For the record, and on the basis of one short visit to Cuba, I share the ambivalence, though the level of my pre-visit support for Cuba was considerably reduced by actual experience).

This account, then, of the study tours to Cuba, is partial but well worth reading. However, NGOs are neither typical nor professional tour operators, the tours cater for a niche market, and they are likely to disappear as Cuba becomes more capitalist-orientated. Another question - equally worth asking - is whether or not the more typical, resort-based tourism, for example, of Varadero, is *also* contributing to Cuban development. And if so - how?

## References

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Horowitz, I. and Suchlicki, J. eds. (2003: 11<sup>th</sup> edition) *Cuban Communism* New Brunswick:  
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